

Thomas Cottrell is Bellevue Club's contributing wine columnist and the owner of La Cantina Wine Merchants.

SMALL CHANGES IN TERROIR CAN MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

Several months ago a small error appeared in one of my monthly articles, the result of an electronic glitch. I used a French word that the printer's spell checker didn't like, so it changed terroir into terrain. It wasn't a terrible substitution—after all, it could have chosen terrier or terror—but it wasn't the right word, either, so the meaning of the sentence was altered.

But it got me to thinking that I'd never written much about this often used word, and I determined to make up for that oversight by explaining exactly what French winemakers mean when they use terroir—and they use it quite a lot, as do winemakers and wine writers around the world. The concept is a complicated one, but here's an attempt to explain.

Terroir is the total natural world that affects a given vineyard and makes it, and the wines it produces, unique. Some people mistakenly believe that it simply means the soil type in which the vines are planted; in reality, it involves much more (including terrain, interestingly).

Climate is a large part of this, especially rainfall and temperature. Sunlight is another part of the equation: is the site warm or cool, and how many hours of sunlight do the vines receive during the growing season?

The soil type is certainly important, including the chemicals it contains and how well the soils drain. Is the soil clay, loam, stony or some combination? And what is the topography of the vineyard? It can have a great impact on all of the above.

Each of these elements is on display in a place such as Burgundy. The most famous vineyards in Burgundy—whence come the most expensive red wines of Burgundy—are located on a hillside called the Côte de Nuits. The vineyards rise up

along this hillside from the valley floor at an increasingly acute angle until they reach nearly to the crest.

But the very best vineyards—Richebourg, La Tache and the rest—all lie right in the middle of the slope, where the incline is neither too flat nor too steep. In that "sweet spot," the grapes get the best exposure to the sun, and the soils are best—and best drained. In fact, everything comes together to create a perfect location for the growing of pinot noir grapes.


If you visit a grower's cellar in Burgundy you may have the chance to taste as many as a dozen different examples of pinot noir, all fashioned by one man from vineyards that are clustered around just one or two villages. The quality will range from modest Bourgogne—just plain Burgundy in English—up through his most expensive Grand Cru, but they will have much in common. They're all produced from the same grape, after all.


Having said that, though, each wine will have a distinctive characteristic that will set it apart from its brethren. The differences may be great or they may be small, but you'll be able to spot them, especially if you're a careful taster.

I've heard cynics claim that these differences can be accounted for by new oak barrels, or by extra attention being lavished on the best vineyards; to a certain extent, they're right. But extra oak, indeed all the newest winemaking techniques that sometimes obliterate the distinctive qualities of vineyards and even regions, can only go so far. There is a very real difference between wines from different vineyards, and this is the essence of terroir.


The French believe that terroir defines quality and the best vineyards will always produce the best wines. I'm not so sure about that—winemaking has a big role to play there, as well as personal taste. But at the end of the day, the French are right about one thing: the unique character of each vineyard, in all its aspects, inevitably accounts for the unique character of the wine that's grown there.

And we should be glad this is so. Without the differences in terroir, the world of wine would be a much less interesting place.






SBS240



SBS245

SBS240 - 3 temperature zones (BioFresh, refrigerator and freezer)
 SBS245 - 5 temperature zones (BioFresh, refrigerator, freezer, 2 wine storage)

...Liebherr, Europe's Finest in Refrigeration



**ARNOLD'S
APPLIANCE**

1034 116th Ave. NE • Bellevue
425.454.7929